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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women

Statement submitted by the Bahá'í International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

Mobilizing institutional, legal and cultural resources to achieve gender equality

The central role of girls and women in the development of families, communities and nations has been clearly established: women are the first educators of the next generation; their education has a tremendous impact on the family's physical, social and economic well-being; their economic participation increases productivity and drives economic progress; their presence in public life has been associated with better governance and lower levels of corruption. No country, however, has yet achieved a full measure of gender equality. While women bear the most direct costs of this persistent inequality, the progress of all facets of human society is hindered as half of the world's population is held back from realizing its potential.

The last several decades have produced landmark documents elaborating the rights of women, calling for an end to all forms of discrimination against women, and outlining strategies to advance gender equality.[1] The systematic implementation of these measures will no doubt require a careful re-thinking of budget priorities and processes. Financing this effort, however, is only part of the equation. As the Bahá'í International Community noted in its statement to the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women, a massive divide still separates the legal apparatus and the culture – embodied in values and institutional norms – required to achieve gender equality.[2] A comprehensive approach to financing gender equality will need to address the constellation of cultural, institutional, and legal obstacles holding back the urgently needed progress of half of the world's population.

From this perspective, we offer three measures for governments' consideration: (a) the adoption of a long-term perspective to guide short and medium-term efforts to finance gender equality; (b) the use of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to evaluate national budgets; and (c) the engagement of religious perspectives and institutions.

Adoption of a long-term perspective

To articulate a coherent and compelling vision of gender equality, leaders will need to move away from a predominantly crisis-driven, reactive mode of operation. Alongside short-term goals, they will need to frame policies from a long-term perspective, unconstrained by the intellectual straightjacket of election cycles. An exclusive focus on short-term goals too often falls prey to minimum standards,

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[1] **The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, The Beijing Platform for Action, the Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security along with the Millennium Development Goals have provided a vision and concrete plans for action.**

[2] Bahá'í International Community. (2006). *Beyond Legal Reforms: Culture and Capacity in the Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls*. New York.

narrow orientations and compromise positions. A long-term orientation, looking ahead one, two, or more generations, would allow governments to explore a wider range of policy and programmatic options and to consider a diversity of contributions – including those from nongovernmental, business, academic and informal sectors.[3]

The first pillar of the long-term approach is a consensus about the broader goals of development and the outcomes to be achieved. Governments will need to articulate the goals of gender equality in terms of the well-being of society as a whole: its boys, girls, men, women; its peace and security, health and well-being, economic progress, environmental sustainability, and its institutions of governance. The second pillar of the long-term approach involves the measurement of progress towards stated goals. Even in instances where a country may be sensitive to the gender dimension, it often lacks the monitoring tools and systems to gauge the impact of its policies on girls and women. As such, the development of indicators will be essential to determine the effectiveness of financing initiatives. Given the diversity of national and local contexts, one-size-fits-all indicators will not be feasible – each region will need to develop tools most appropriate to its circumstances. The Bahá'í International Community looks forward to participating in discussions about this important initiative.

Aligning national budgets with human rights standards

Our second recommendation to governments concerns measures to bring national budgets into compliance with international human rights standards. Far from being value neutral, a government's budget reflects the values of the country – whom it values, whose work it values, and what it rewards.[4] While budgets are not typically formulated with a gender perspective, the proliferation of Gender Budget Initiatives suggests that these worlds are gradually coming together to bring budgeting processes in line with state obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This type of gender analysis helps to identify gender inequalities in budget processes, allocations, and outcomes; and assesses states' responsibilities to address these inequalities.[5] For the rights-based approach to be effective, however, it must take into account not only women but rather their entire life cycle – from birth to childhood and youth – as discrimination begins and compounds in these early stages.

The rights-based approach is not without precedent. A number of countries have successfully empowered women politically, boosted their rate of participation in the labor force, and helped to facilitate a balance between work and family life.[6] Governments would be well served by

[3] Given that it takes approximately 17 years for an individual to complete secondary education and approximately 20 years to complete higher education, a long-term perspective can more fully take into account and seek to shape the educational resources of a nation.

[4] Budlender, D. (ed.) (1996). *The Women's Budget*, Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), Cape Town.

[5] Elson, Diane. (2006). *Budgeting for Women's Rights: Monitoring Government Budgets for Compliance with CEDAW*. United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM): New York.

[6] Hausmann, Ricardo, Laura D. Tyson, and Saadia Zahidi. (2007). *The Global Gender Gap Report 2007*. World Economic Forum: Davos, Switzerland.

examining closely the practices of those countries which have achieved a measure of success with these seemingly intractable problems. Norway, which the United Nations Development Programme has ranked highest on the Gender-related development index and the Gender empowerment measure, may serve as a useful example. An analysis of effective gender-specific policies and the legal, institutional, and culture obstacles to the adoption of such policies in other counties would help to formulate policy recommendations on the basis of concrete examples.

Engaging religion and religious leaders

Too often, policy makers have been resistant to addressing the cultural and religious dimensions of attitudes governing the treatment of women – fearing the potentially divisive nature of such an undertaking or lacking knowledge about whom to address and how to proceed. Yet the achievement of gender equality has been painstakingly slow precisely because questions about the roles and responsibilities of women challenge some of the most deeply entrenched human attitudes. Given the tremendous capacity of religion to influence the masses - both to inspire and to vilify - governments cannot afford to turn a blind eye.

In the absence of a sustained dialogue between governments and religions, religious extremism flourishes. Fuelled at various times by poverty, instability, the socio-economic changes accompanying globalization and access to information technologies, radical religious voices have exerted tremendous influence on politics and public policy. Among the casualties of this development has been the role of women in public life as evidenced, in some parts of the world, by a return to narrowly defined notions of a woman's place in the family, the community, and the world. The decrease in funding for woman's rights has been partly attributed to these social and cultural shifts. Complicating matters further is the fact that many states continue to hide behind cultural and religious reservations to international treaties concerning the rights of women. Today - nearly sixty years after adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and 26 years after CEDAW entered into force - governments can no longer ignore religious practices and doctrines that stand in flagrant violation of international human rights standards. These must be subject to examination and scrutiny.

Despite this challenging reality, religious organizations constitute some of the oldest, far-reaching networks in the world. In many conflict-torn countries, they are the only surviving institutions. In the areas of health, environment, debt relief and humanitarian support, it is religious organizations that have been at the forefront of efforts to reach neglected areas and to influence government policy. Furthermore, given the tremendous weight of religion and culture in shaping perceptions about the role of women in society, religious organizations and constituencies will need to be meaningfully engaged in efforts to further the gender equality agenda. While at first, the language of finance and economics appears incompatible with that of ethics and values (common to religions), both governments and religious organizations need to become familiar with each other's rationale and perspectives - recognizing that these concern the same reality. An equitable economic system is not possible without agreement about

underlying values; and notions of ethics and values divorced from economic conditions will not be realized.

By adopting a long-term perspective, working to align national budgets with human rights obligations, and engaging with religions, governments can mobilize the institutional, cultural and legal resources that facilitate efforts to finance gender equality. It must be borne in mind, however, that the advancement of women is not a privilege, a technical exercise, or a magic bullet. It is part of a broader exercise of creating an ordered society in which relationships between men and women, parents and children, employees and employers, the governors and the governed adhere to principles of justice and emulate the highest aspirations of humankind.